

National Alliance for Nutrition and Activity

Update USDA's School Nutrition Standards: Cosponsor the Child Nutrition Promotion and School Lunch Protection Act

The Child Nutrition Promotion and School Lunch Protection Act:

- * Calls on the USDA to update its nutrition standards for school foods sold outside of meals to ensure that it conforms with current nutrition science and addresses pressing threats to child health and nutrition at school.
- * Applies the new definition to all foods sold in schools outside of federally reimbursed school meals throughout the school grounds and the school day.

The School Foods Playing Field is Uneven.

School meals must meet detailed nutrition standards set by Congress and USDA in order for a school food service program to receive federal subsidies. The meals typically are balanced and contain recommended amounts of vitamins and minerals.

In contrast, the nutrition standards are outdated for foods sold outside the meal programs (sometimes referred to as "competitive" foods). Such foods include those sold in vending machines, cafeteria a la carte, school stores, snack bars, and fund-raisers.



USDA's School Nutrition Standards Should Support Parental Authority and Parents' Efforts to Feed Children a Healthy Diet.

Parents entrust schools with the care of their children during the school day, where children spend many of their waking hours and eat 1 to 4 of their meals/snacks. USDA supports parents by ensuring that the meals sold in schools are balanced and provide recommended amounts of nutrients and food groups. The sale of low-nutrition foods in schools outside of meals undermines parents' ability to help their children eat healthfully.

Parents should not have to worry that their children will spend their lunch money on low-nutrition foods from vending machines, school stores, and a la carte in the cafeteria, instead of on balanced school meals.

"All foods and beverages sold or served to students in school should be healthful and meet an accepted nutritional content standard."

— Institute of Medicine,
*Preventing Childhood Obesity:
Health in the Balance*, 2005.

Parents Want Congress to Improve School Foods.^{1,2,3}

A national poll by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation found that 90% of parents and teachers support the conversion of school vending machine contents to healthy beverages and foods.¹ Similarly, a 2005 *Wall Street Journal*/Harris Interactive

Health-Care poll found that 83% of all adults think that “public schools should do more to limit children’s access to unhealthy foods like snack foods, sugary soft drinks, and fast foods.”⁴

Nutritionally Poor Foods Are Widely Available in Schools. Nationally, 83% of elementary schools, 97% of middle/junior high schools, and 99% of senior high schools sell foods and beverages out of vending machines, school stores, or a la carte in the cafeteria.⁵ The most common items sold include soft drinks, sports drinks, imitation fruit juices, chips, candy, cookies, and snack cakes.^{6,7,8} The sale of foods outside of the meal programs can negatively affect children's diets, since many are high in calories, added sugars, and fat and low in nutrients.⁹

Most Schools Have Closed Campuses. Nationally, 94% of elementary schools, 89% of middle/junior high schools, and 73% of high schools have closed campuses.¹⁰ As a result, many students are unable to leave campus to purchase soft drinks, candy, or other low-nutrition foods.

USDA’s Current School Nutrition Standards Undermine Educators’ Efforts to Teach Nutrition. Many experts agree that nutrition education is essential to addressing childhood obesity and other diet-related diseases. Selling low-nutrition foods in schools contradicts nutrition education and sends children the message that good nutrition is unimportant. The school environment should reinforce classroom nutrition education by modeling and supporting healthy behaviors.



Dispelling School Funding Myths. Across the country, schools are switching to selling healthier foods and are not losing revenue. According to USDA and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), “students will buy and consume healthful foods and beverages – and schools can make money from selling healthful options.”¹¹ Their study of 17 schools and school districts found that, after improving school foods, 12 schools and districts increased revenue and four reported no change.

While school vending contracts appear lucrative, they usually provide only a small percentage of a school district’s budget. On a per-student basis, school vending contracts typically do not raise large amounts of revenue. A Government Accountability Office study found that schools raised between \$3 and \$30 per student *per year* from their soft drink contracts.¹² In Austin Independent School District, students spent \$504,000 per year on products from school vending machines, but schools received only \$90,000 of the proceeds.

Are the Funds Raised from School Vending New Money? School vending revenue appears to be largely a shift in revenue from the school foods service programs to the vending account. The Texas Department of Agriculture estimates that Texas schools raise \$54 million per year from vending sales, while the state's school food service operations may lose \$60 million per year to the sale of foods sold outside of the meal programs.¹³

USDA's Nutrition Standards for Foods Sold Outside of Meals Are Outdated. Nutrition science has evolved since USDA implemented its nutrition standards in 1979. The standards no longer make sense from the standpoint of science, current dietary patterns, and health. Over the past several decades, over-consumption of calories, saturated fat, trans fat, refined sugars, and sodium have increasingly become problems in children's diets. Those constituents are not addressed by USDA's school nutrition standards. Excessive consumption of those constituents contributes to obesity, heart disease, cancer, stroke, diabetes, and tooth decay.

The only nutritional criteria for school foods sold outside of meals are that "foods of minimal nutritional value" (FMNV) may not be sold in the food service area during meal times. FMNV are foods that provide less than 5% of the Reference Daily Intake (RDI) for eight specified nutrients per serving. Many low-nutrition foods are not considered FMNV despite their high contents of calories, saturated fat, salt, or added sugars, and thus can be sold anywhere on school campuses anytime during the school day.

USDA's current nutrition standards result in arbitrary limits on the sale of foods in school cafeterias.

Allowed:

Fruitades (*with little juice*)
French fries
Ice cream
Candy bars
Cookies
Chips
Snack cakes
Doughnuts

Not Allowed:

Seltzer water
Caramel corn
Popsicles (*without fruit/fruit juice*)
Jelly beans
Chewing gum
Lollipops
Cotton candy
Breath mints

Nutrition standards are important not only in the cafeteria but throughout the school. During meal periods, the sale of FMNV is prohibited by federal regulations in areas of the school where USDA school meals are sold or eaten. However, FMNV can be sold anywhere else on-campus -- including just outside the cafeteria -- at any time. When USDA defined FMNV in 1979, most foods on campus were sold in the cafeteria. Now, the vast majority of schools also sell food outside the cafeteria. Setting nutrition standards only for foods sold in the cafeteria is out of line with current practices in today's schools.

Updated Standards Would Ensure That Federal Dollars Spent on School Lunch Programs Are Not Undermined and That Nutrition Goals Are Achieved.

Since the Truman administration, school meals have been regulated at the federal level. Congress and USDA set detailed standards for school lunches and breakfasts. The federal government invests huge amounts of money -- \$9.4 billion in FY 2004 -- in school lunches and breakfasts.¹⁴ Selling low-nutrition foods in schools undermines that investment.

Most states and localities leave the development of dietary guidance to federal agencies. The majority of the nation's 14,000 school districts are not equipped to develop science-based nutrition standards for school foods. There is no scientific basis for nutrition standards to differ for children in different states, and there should be a minimum protective nutrition standard for foods sold in schools nationwide. States and local school districts would be free to exceed that standard and to choose which healthful foods and beverages are most appealing to their students.

Changing USDA's School Nutrition Standards Will Not Cost the Federal Government Anything, but Not Changing the Current Policy Is Costly.

The sale of nutrition-poor foods in schools will result in high costs to federal taxpayers for treating diet-related diseases, such as heart disease, cancer, diabetes, stroke, and osteoporosis, through the Medicaid and Medicare programs and federal employee health insurance. Those diseases have their roots in childhood.

The Surgeon General's Call to Action to Prevent and Decrease Overweight and Obesity 2001 recommends that "[i]ndividuals and groups across all settings ... [adopt] policies specifying that all foods and beverages available at school contribute toward eating patterns that are consistent with the Dietary Guidelines for Americans."

According to the USDA, healthier diets could prevent at least \$71 billion per year in medical costs, lost productivity, and lost lives.¹⁵ U.S. health-care costs due to obesity are \$94 billion a year,¹⁶ half of which (\$47 billion) is paid through Medicare and Medicaid. From 1979 to 1999, annual hospital costs for treating obesity-related diseases in children rose three-fold (from \$35 million to \$127 million).¹⁷

Strong School Nutrition Standards Improve Children's Diets. School food policies limiting access to high-fat, high-sugar foods have been associated with fewer purchases of those items by students.¹⁸ After the transition to middle school, when students gain access to school snack bars, students tend to eat fewer fruits and vegetables¹⁹ and drink less milk and more sweetened beverages than they did in elementary school.²⁰ Since an estimated 35-50% of calories are consumed at school,²¹ it is critical that all food and beverages sold in schools make a positive contribution to children's diets and health.

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